

BOOK REVIEWS

traffic toward her waiting child the image of her grandmother (her maternal history) melts, and “she feels herself crumbling like bits of jackhammered asphalt.” This image is both deliberate and ambiguous, and it leaves the reader smack in the middle of contemporary mothering dilemmas, where theory meets practice.

The writing throughout this collection is careful, but not in a way to protect readers from the childhood trauma identified in P. R. Newton’s “Ethiopia Incense” or the impact of the petroleum industry on children’s health identified in Sheena Wilson’s “Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World.” The sensitivities revealed are mothers’ interpretations of the world they live in, interpretations filtered through embodied practices in the day-to-day work of raising their children. It is a sensitivity born of language that knows the labour of breathing life into, and the agony of letting go. The stories in this collection are a must read for understanding mothering labour through the hearts and hands of women engaged in the day-to-day practice of creating future generations.

Stay-at-Home Mothers: Dialogues and Debates

Boyd, Elizabeth Reid and Gayle Letherby, eds.
Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2014

REVIEWED BY AMANDA WATSON

Stay-at-Home Mothers is an interdisciplinary anthology that draws on a range of international perspectives about women’s experiences of mothering at home. It explores generally the question of why mothers stay at home and under what conditions, and also addresses questions of maternal subjectivity, the affect of motherhood, and the factors influencing the complicated decision (or lack thereof) to undertake mother work fulltime.

Editors Elizabeth Reid Boyd and Gayle Letherby do not aspire to a representative volume, and instead they offer a range of angles with the assertion, “it is time for the voices of Stay-at-Home Mothers to be heard” (9). The book aims to present stay-at-home mothering as a complex site of continued conflict: with losses and gains, costs and benefits. Resisting the division between stay-at-home mothers and mothers working for pay, the editors argue for recognition of the relationship between mothers at work and mothers at home in order to engage the childcare debate with an appreciation for the structural constraints affecting women’s lives.

The volume's 24 chapters are organized into four units: "The Mommy Wars," "National Perspectives," "Manifestations of Mothers at Home," and "Re-imagining Stay-at-Home Motherhood." Chapters vary in approach and genre, from empirical research on the experience of temporary foreign workers in Canada, to media studies analysis of stereotypes and the stigma of stay-at-home mothering and domesticity in the United States, to a memoir on mothering as a quest for spiritual fulfillment. Most authors articulate the momentous challenges mothers face in contemporary unsupportive, precarious conditions. Hotaling depicts "the narrow pass" of motherhood according to the "untenable paradox" of seeking balance and devotion to mothering, while others detail the "push and pull factors" (Brown, Brady, and Letherby 97) affecting stay-at-home motherhood, the disjointed earning patterns of partnered mothers joining and leaving the workforce called the "(m)ommy curve" (Boyd and Larsen 157), and the strategic manoeuvres of "chameleon mothers" who appear to be mothering at home full time while they also work for pay full time (Weatherill 173). Some authors engage media representations of the "mommy wars," (Reeber and Kaplan 55, Heffernan 129), and others present the affect of mothering at home, from "ambivalence" (Epstein-Gilboa 31, Rubin 19) to "quiet desperation" (Bautista 223), to the unique feelings of "the day after, and the day after that" (249). Others still present mothers' quest for survival in hostile conditions to unpaid care workers—from the perspective of low-income rural mothers, Jewish-Israeli mothers, young mothers in the UK, and single mothers who migrated from the Caribbean to Ottawa as temporary foreign workers—a gendered labour Villalobos characterizes as "the free gift" (295).

In the Introduction to the volume, Boyd and Letherby offer a brief review of feminist literature on the topic of stay-at-home mothers, beginning with critiques from the 1960s and 70s of women's denial of access to power, women's isolation and dissatisfaction, and radical feminist critique of women's reproduction as a site of oppression. They also cite Rich's work on the complexities of women's desire to mother and the political implications of the institution of motherhood. They move on to note several psychoanalytic contributions to understanding motherhood including Gilligan's work on psychological differences between women and men, Ruddick on women's ways of knowing, Chodorow on motherhood as "developmental" rather than natural, and Segal's critique of motherhood as biological destiny.

While this summary provides some context for the chapters to follow, it is notably missing the major contributions of racialized women. For example, Patricia Hill Collins' work on the institution of motherhood and its foundations in colonialism, racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy, is requisite context for any review of literature on stay-at-home mothering. Also, the contribu-

tions of indigenous voices, particularly around mothering “at home” in a colonial context, are necessary to nuance the work by white women, whose historical consideration of racism and colonial power and its effects on mothers and families is limited at best.

Chapters are insightful as stand-alone presentations of various women’s experiences, providing nuance for our conceptions of mothering at home—and in general—pointing to an affective form of labour that is not yet adequately theorized in feminist political work on mothers, mothering, and reproduction. This volume represents an important contribution to a number of fields of study. As a collection, it is valuable for motherhood scholars who seek to improve their perspective on the intricacies, intimacies, challenges, possibilities, and ambivalence that the care work of stay-at-home mothering and the decision (or not) to stay home involves for different women in different conditions. A number of the chapters also serve as an entry point for sociologists of care work, labour, maternal identity, and family economics who wish to formulate questions around gendered labour and women’s experiences mothering at home. For women’s and gender studies, this is a teachable volume that would serve to initiate dialogue about mothering at home, and would be particularly useful to de-stigmatize both mothering at home and mothering while working for pay outside the home.

The editors rightly frame the volume as enabling a new discussion, and as such, the book should be taken as a window into the experiences of some women mothering at home.

While the collection allows readers to appreciate what the editors call “varying mother views,” without a coherent sense of what they mean by “feminist scholarship” in the introductory chapter, it is up to the reader to assign value and interpret strategies for mothers to resist oppression. What counts as feminist scholarship is also left up to each author’s interpretation, and the resulting volume is both insightful and potentially ill-informed about or hostile to the lives of many women. For example, one chapter is decidedly against outsourcing childcare. It characterizes mothering as “the biological opportunity afforded to women,” and the “practice of creating and maintaining... a vital space of freedom and play” (Ulbrich 289–292). Conversely, other chapters refer to the “non-choice” of stay-at-home mothering in the context of low-income precarious work and prohibitively expensive childcare. A more detailed definition of feminist notions of motherhood and mother work would assist the reader in appreciating the implications of the lack of social support for mothering at home for women in the most precarious circumstances. Still, taken together, these chapters provide insight for scholars of citizenship theory and gendered labour, as they contain a host of compelling messages about how women are positioned as carers and the culturally